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SUCCESS STORY

Local Leaders Transform Community Attitudes About SGBV



Traditional leaders energetically take part in UNDP's sexual and gender-based violence workshop at El Fasher State University.

USAID/OTI funded a training course on combating violence against women for traditional leaders from two of North Darfur's IDP camps.

March 2008 – As the conflict in Darfur moves into its sixth year, the society's coping mechanisms remain under intense strain. A culture of violence continues to permeate the region, and women and young girls are subjected to sexual abuse perpetrated by armed groups acting with impunity. Furthermore, incidences of domestic abuse and other forms of violence have escalated. Sadly, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are often shunned by their families and marginalized within society.

The first step in preventing SGBV is for communities to recognize the gravity of the problem. As part of its effort to combat violence against women in Darfur, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) is supporting the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in its effort to raise community awareness of SGBV.

UNDP recently organized a two-day training course for 47 traditional leaders, *omdas* and *sheikhs*, from the Abu Shouk and El-Salam camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in North Darfur. These leaders remain influential community figures who are regularly consulted by SGBV survivors and their families and are vital in galvanizing community support to address the problem. The *omdas* and *sheikhs* were encouraged to learn about the different forms of SGBV, as well as about the difficulties survivors face in accessing support services. A wide range of international and local activists attended the workshop, and the event helped participants to understand and appreciate the full spectrum of support currently available to survivors.

During the workshop, lively discussions among participants reinforced the belief that community leaders are at the forefront of the fight against SGBV. Traditional leaders provide an effective entry point for helping communities understand what SGBV is, how it affects them, and what they can do to stop it.

By encouraging the *omdas* and *sheikhs* of Darfur's IDP camps to take a lead role in combating SGBV, USAID/OTI and its partners are reinforcing a critical link between survivors and existing services. In addition, these efforts to support survivors and reduce the social stigma attached to SGBV serve as initial steps toward justice.